

TV SHOW Sunday night after the game on WOAI-TV

Jabari Young talks Spurs basketball and NFL football

MAGAZINE:

Jeff McDonald compares Gregg Popovich to the all-time great coaches in all sports



BASKETBALL

Longhorns push No. 1 Duke to overtime

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O'Connor advances as Reagan falls, 45-21

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San Antonio Express-News

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Billings for visits to ER stun patients

Docs often out-of-network

By Jenny Deam
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Jason Pettit sat at his daughter's hospital bedside awash in fear. His only solace was knowing he had good insurance and was in the right place.

It had happened so fast, a moment of play turned to blood and panic. Just before lunch, 7-year-old Ava was on the floor with the family's German shepherd. Pettit held out a pizza roll, but the dog lunged just as his daughter popped it in her mouth. Two holes opened in the little girl's face, and she started to scream.

Pettit doesn't remember the five-minute drive from his house in Webster, near Houston, to Clear Lake Regional Medical Center or the sprint through the emergency room doors. He wasn't wearing a shirt or shoes, and his chest was turning red from where he pressed Ava's torn face against his body.

He fished out his Aetna card.

"I'm at a hospital that is in my network. Everyone who's in this building should be in my network," he thought.

Then the bills from out-of-network doctors began to roll in.

Pettit had tumbled into a multimillion-dollar business practice called balance billing. The system allows doctors outside a patient's coverage network to set higher rates and then shift the "balance" not paid by insurers onto patients.

It happens most often in emergency care, where vulnerable patients have no way of knowing in advance who will treat them. Just because the hospital is in network does not mean the doctor will be, too.

Emerging evidence suggests that it may be no accident.

In Texas, 48 percent of overall claims from emergency room physicians were outside the

Bills continues on A2



After Ava Pettit was hospitalized for a dog bite, her family got unexpectedly high bills because out-of-network doctors were used.



The lighting of the 55-foot tree, joined by 200,000 white lights in Travis Park, kicked off the city's yuletide season.

Tradition and change

In a first, holiday tree is lit up at Travis Park

By Vincent T. Davis and Alia Malik
STAFF WRITERS

As darkness fell at Travis Park on Friday night, Carrie Briseño recalled when she was a little girl and her parents took her to Alamo Plaza for the traditional lighting ceremony of the city tree.

Now she was with her daughter, Vanessa Aguilar, and son-in-law, Gilbert Aguilar, who brought their 2-year-old son, Dominic, who danced to the songs of mariachis at the lit stage.

"I used to bring my kids when they were little," said



Briseño, 55. "Now, they bring their kids."

It's time for a new tradition, she said, both for her family and the city.

Lighting continues on A16

Santa and Mrs. Claus take part in the annual Ford Holiday River Parade.

ExpressNews.com

Video: See the city's Christmas tree light up at its new location at Travis Park.

Fears raised of insurance program's cash drying up

By Allie Morris
AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN — It took months to find the medication that would temper Dakota Flores' son's anger and help keep him awake and focused in school. Now the eighth-grader at Jones Middle School is earning accolades in classes and choir, but Flores is afraid that it could soon slip away.

Congress missed the September deadline to renew funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program,



Billy Calzada / San Antonio Express-News

Dakota Flores serves dinner to her children Tyler Reinn (from left), Serenity Grace and Harmonie Lovve. The family participates in the Children's Health Insurance Program.

which covers doctor visits, prescriptions and other medical needs for Flores' son and nearly half a million more low-income Texas children. With no action in Washington, Texas is projected to run out of money for CHIP by the end of January.

"I can't sleep. I am nervous. I don't know what's going on," said Flores, a single mother of four who works at a pawnshop in San Antonio. "He is going so far due to his medication. You take it away and you will see his progress drop."

CHIP has typically enjoyed support from Republicans and Democrats, but this year lawmakers haven't found agreement on how to fund it. Subsidized by federal and state dollars, CHIP will end under Texas law if money from Washington dries up.

Texas legislators and advocates are now starting to push for state backup plans if federal delays persist.

House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, recently called on the state health agency to

CHIP continues on A16

WEATHER

HIGH **79** LOW **53** Sunny Full report, C12

TRICENTENNIAL

Artist was renowned for his depictions. **Page A6**

365 days of tacos

Papas rancheras from Taquería La Joya de Durango. See ExpressNews.com/Tacos

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